

Help-Seeking Patterns in College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Research consistently shows that college students who take advantage of supports and accommodations perform better academically. The literature is not clear, however, on whether college students with disabilities seek help more or less frequently than their peers without disabilities. One major form of help is consulting with professors outside of the classroom. This study recruited faculty members across disciplines at a small liberal arts college and asked them to record all student office visits for the second half of a semester. Working in conjunction with the office of disability support services, help-seeking data were tabulated for students with and without disabilities and compared by subject area. Results show that students with disabilities sought help (i.e., met with professors) at rates similar to those of their peers without disabilities.

Most colleges and universities have significant academic supports available to all students. These interventions include, but are not limited to, tutoring, mentoring, skills development workshops, and specialized writing support. There is ample evidence that taking advantage of such interventions does result in academic improvement for many individual students (Keimig, 1984; Palmer & Roessler, 2000; Platt, 1988; Trammell, 2003). Most schools and universities also offer accommodations to help students with disabilities achieve academic success (Lancaster, Mellard, & Hoffman, 2001b).

At many colleges and universities, the first line of defense against poor student performance is a personal meeting outside of the classroom between the professor and the student. According to Light (2001), 89% of all college students can name one professor or advisor who has made a dramatic difference in the success of his or her college career. Light (2001) maintains that the importance of the student-professor relationship transcends differences between types and sizes of institutions. No one has a better idea of how a student can improve in a class than the professor; that is, no one is in a better position to make an immediate difference with feedback (Light, 2001).

Similar to other academic and ADA supports mentioned earlier, the meeting between professor and stu-

dent outside of the classroom relies in large part on the willingness of students to become engaged in a dialogue and actively seek out help (Frank, 2004). Professors, when compared to more accessible high school teachers, sometimes appear to incoming freshmen to be aloof, unapproachable, or too busy to help individual students (Gartin & Rumrill, 1996). However, students who approach their professors generally report a positive benefit, and the issue is primarily one of motivation and willingness to seek help.

Academic success for college freshmen is linked to student effort and motivation to succeed (Platt, 1988). That is, students must actively seek out help in order for it to have any impact. If a student chooses not to take advantage of assistance, he or she may fall through the cracks or fail out of school without the opportunity for interventions to be implemented or to be effective (Brown, 1994; Clarke, 1992). The ability and motivation to seek help is a necessary skill that translates beyond college into the work world and the other daily requirements of adult life (Price, Gerber, Mulligan, & Williams, 2005). In short, for the struggling college student with disabilities, learning to seek help is critical to all postsecondary endeavors (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Gilbert, 1996).

Social scientists have conducted research for some time in the area of help-seeking behavior and disability

(Johnson, 2001; Willis, Fabian, & Hendershot, 2005; Wrigley, Jackson, Judd, & Komiti, 2005). The findings are sometimes contradictory. For example, a 2002 cross-sectional survey in a rural Australian community found that disability was not a significant factor in determining whether or not individuals sought help for mental health problems (Wrigley et al., 2005). A study using National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) data from all 50 U.S. states, however, found that individuals with disabilities asked for help much more frequently than their peers without disabilities (Willis et al., 2005). On the other hand, Hartmann-Hall and Haaga (2002) found in their survey of college students with disabilities that, due to heightened levels of stigma, students with disabilities were less likely to seek help from anyone. A quasi-experimental study by O'Neil, Lancee and Freeman (1984) revealed that students with depression sought help at different rates according to the severity of their depression. In a similar vein, a study on postsecondary students with disabilities and accommodation patterns showed that nearly 40% of students with disabilities reported difficulty asking questions, talking with teachers, and other verbal skills (Lancaster, Mellard, & Hoffman, 2001a). This study also found that students with disabilities sought help in the form of accommodations based on very specific needs, and based on the perceived accessibility of help. All of these reported studies were non-experimental in design.

Several other studies specifically inform the debate on help-seeking behavior and college students with disabilities; and in two cases, they used randomized experimental designs that potentially have greater external validity. For example, Palmer and Roessler (2000) found that college students with disabilities were not knowledgeable about their rights and often needed help in seeking out accommodations or support services. These researchers designed a self-advocacy treatment program and compared it with a control group. The results indicated that students who completed the program exhibited significant improvements in help-seeking behaviors and displayed better mastery of their college learning environment. Few postsecondary institutions have self-advocacy programs such as the one in the Palmer et al. (2002) study, and such programs are traditionally viewed as being within the domain of high school case managers and transition specialists, rather than college support programs.

Rozell, Gunderson and Terpstra (1997) designed an experimental study in which students were randomly assigned to potentially stressful scenarios and their responses were recorded after the treatment to measure

helplessness. Using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and other univariate analyses, the researchers found significant differences between sexes when considering sex role identity differences and learned helplessness (Rozell, et al., 1997). In more practical terms, they found that gender can influence how prepared students are to seek help in different scenarios.

In a review of the literature, Torkelson, Lynch, and Gussel (1996) ranked self-advocacy as a critical skill that facilitates help-seeking behavior. They noted that disclosure of a disability and self-advocacy are ultimately the student's responsibility, but that the learning environment created by the faculty, staff, and students at a postsecondary institution will determine in large part whether or not students seek help or not. The authors emphasized the connection between the decision to disclose, which is necessary to receive accommodations, and the disability climate on campus, which may be the largest determining factor in whether or not to disclose (Torkelson and Gussel, 1996). Along similar lines, Hartmann-Hall and Haaga (2002) focused in their survey research on what factors in particular influenced the help-seeking behavior of college students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Three major impediments to help seeking included: failure to set or focus on goals; low self-esteem or self-perceptions; and personal beliefs about disability. Similar to Torkelson and Gussel (1996), they found that students with disabilities sought help based on their initial impressions of the climate on campus as it related to disability.

Finally, in a pair of quasi-experimental studies, Karabenick (2004) found that help-seeking behaviors in students with disabilities were linked to motivation. Karabenick also confirmed what many other studies have shown, that help seeking-behavior is essentially a social activity, and carries with it the social demands that other personal interactions do. Therefore, the attitudes of professors and other students may directly influence the decision about whether or not to seek help outside the classroom (Karabenick, 2004).

Taken together, these experimental and non experimental studies suggest that the decision to seek help is complex, multilayered, and highly correlated to the climate and disability environment on campus, as well as to personal factors related to motivation, which vary from student to student. The differences in the findings in the reported studies can likely be explained in part by the differences in sampling frame and study design. However, the stigmatizing effect of disability seems to be a significant factor in all of the studies,

and likely influences when college students with disabilities go for help and when they do not (Green, 2003; O'Neil et al., 1984).

Based on the literature and previous findings, this study addressed a primary research question: Do students with disabilities seek help at significantly different rates than their peers without disabilities?

The study also addressed several corollary questions such as do females seek help at different rates than males? There is evidence that college females more readily seek out help than males (Johnson, 2001). Do students seek out help from their professors at higher rates within certain disciplines? Is there a reliable model for predicting who will go for help, and who will not?

Methods

Subjects

To answer the primary research question, a descriptive cross-sectional design was selected, using a survey-type log book to record student behavior (who, when, and why the student visited a professor outside of the classroom). The study was quantitative in nature, primarily involving the collection and tabulation of frequency data, and best classified as a non-experimental form of survey research.

Professors

Thirty-two full-time and part-time professors at Randolph-Macon College (R-MC), a small mid-Atlantic, private liberal arts college, initially agreed to participate in the study. Twenty-one professors representing 11 different academic disciplines completed the study by submitting full data. The remaining 11 either did not submit any data or reported receiving no student visitors during the study timeframe. Volunteers were solicited by an email invitation, which promised feedback on personal student visit data, as well as aggregate reports on the overall study (see Appendix A). Each professor also was given free promotional items with the logo of the learning center printed on them.

Based on previous faculty-based studies at R-MC, the initial response rate for volunteers (36%) was unexpectedly high for the relatively small faculty (90 members), perhaps indicating that the issue of student visits outside of class was an important issue as it related to course load and expectations for work outside of the classroom. An additional dynamic acknowledged in the study was that the disability support services office maintained close ties with faculty on campus. This may have positively influenced the type and number of faculty participants (i.e., recruiting professors who were more likely to encourage students to visit, and recruiting more professors).

Students

The student participants were drawn from the entire student body ($N = 1,150$), meaning that any student on campus who had a scheduled or unscheduled office visit with a participating faculty member during the timeframe of the study was a potential participant. While this did not constitute a true random sample, since a form of self-selection was involved, it did presume an element of randomness due to the fact that seeking out professors during office hours is a widely accepted academic activity open to all students (i.e., there is no certain way to predict which students will actually do so). The fact that students who do seek help tend to be more motivated and more self-determined was assumed a priori.

Procedure

Each participating faculty member was provided with a student visit log book (see Appendix B), consent forms, and written directions for recording data. The visit log book consisted of blank log pages designed with large print to be simple, clear, and easy to use. The R-MC Institutional Review Board (IRB) and several cooperating faculty members made suggestions that enhanced the reliability of the log sheets before the study began. Five categories of student visit type were created, so that student visits could be coded on the log sheet as related to: tests, advising, questions related specifically to majors and minors, papers, or "other."

Faculty participants were also given written instructions for how to fill out the log book and seek informed consent from students who visited them. Several faculty members asked about adapting the data form, or filling it in weekly rather than from visit to visit. Some minor adjustments to the protocol were ultimately permitted on a case-by-case basis, granting that they would not compromise the integrity of the data or contradict the conditions approved by the IRB. Anecdotally, faculty participants reported during the course of the study period (the last half of a fall semester) that less than half a dozen students declined to participate in the study.

At the end of the semester, or when their log sheets were full, faculty members were instructed to turn in their log book to the primary researcher for data entry and coding, using nominal variables for disability status, type of disability, gender, subject area, and type of help sought. If faculty members filled their log sheets before the end of the semester, new log sheets were issued to them. New informed consent forms were also supplied to professors who used all of the forms initially provided to them.

The study took place between November 15 (just past mid-terms) and December 15 (the last day of finals), a period of time during which student visits to professors traditionally increase at R-MC. With 31 faculty participants, it was expected that somewhere between 500 and 1,000 student visits would be recorded, or an average of 10-20 student visits per professor.

Design

The choice of a quantitative, non experimental design was based on the need to make reasonable comparisons between students with and without disabilities, to generate as large a pool of visits as possible, and the need to collect data within a relatively short time frame. Although limited by the characteristics of the study campus, the number of anticipated data points (between 500 and 1,000 individual student visits anticipated) promised adequate cases for valid statistical analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

After all of the log sheets were collected at the end of the semester, the data were entered into an SPSS version 13.0 spreadsheet and coded. As the data were entered, the director of disability support services compared the names on the log sheets to the names of students who had self-disclosed as having a disability through the DSS office, and that information was added to the database in coded format. Each student visit was coded separately.

After all of the data were entered, arrangements were made to destroy the original log sheets that contained student names, so that no connection between student data in the spreadsheet could be connected to specific student names on the log sheets. Planned data analyses included tabulation of basic descriptive statistics, including total visits by type and by subject area, and a series of chi-square tests to check for significant differences between subgroups, primarily between students with self-disclosed disabilities and students without disabilities. There were also plans to run an exploratory logisitic regression equation to see if help seeking could be reliably predicted by demographic characteristics.

Reliability and Validity

Several aspects of reliability and validity were addressed in considering the design of the study. First, in terms of reliability, specific directions were developed in conjunction with the participating faculty to ensure that student visits were logged consistently across disciplines. Staying after class for several minutes and answering student questions after a lecture, for example, did not qualify as a help-seeking visit. To count as a visit, students had to physically meet a professor

at his/her office or some other prearranged location outside of the classroom, and outside of normal class time.

A validity issue that was addressed was the nature of the small liberal arts campus environment. Randolph-Macon College advertises itself as a college that practices "hand cultivation" of students and prides itself on the degree to which faculty work with students one on one outside of the classroom. In this study, however, the concern was not with overall rates of help seeking, but rather with differential rates of help seeking between students with self-disclosed disabilities and students without disabilities.

It was anticipated that the findings would serve as a starting point for further investigation of help-seeking behavior, specifically as it relates to postsecondary students with disabilities. Thus, the forms, variables, and overall design were intentionally structured to allow for future replication at other similar postsecondary institutions, or again at R-MC.

Results

The 21 reporting faculty participants documented a total of 413 student visits during the study period. The 413 visits were made by a total of 185 different students. Of the 185 individual students, 19 or 10.3% were students with self-disclosed disabilities. This compared to 13% of the entire student body that had self-disclosed a disability at R-MC at the beginning of the semester (150 out of 1,150) to the DSS office. Using a chi-square statistic to compare these percentages, the ratio of students with disabilities seeking help in the study was not statistically different ($p > .05$) from the overall population of students with disabilities on campus.

Students without disabilities made an average of 2.25 visits to specific professors during the study period, whereas students with self-disclosed disabilities made 2.11 visits, on average. Using a *t*-test to compare these group means, no statistical difference was found, $t(183) = .251, p > .05$. By this criterion, students with disabilities were seeking help at rates similar to those of their peers without disabilities.

Numerical differences were found in what students specifically sought help for from their professors (see Table 1). However, computation of a chi-square statistic found no significant statistical differences ($p > .05$) between students with or without disabilities in any category. There were no reported visits for the express purpose of advising, probably due to the time of the semester the data were gathered.

Table 1*Total Visits by Disability Status and Reason*

	1-Test	2-Advising	3-Major	4-Paper	5-Other
Students with Disabilities (<i>n</i> = 40)	9(22.5%)	5(12.5%)	-----	10(25.0%)	16(40.0%)
Students without Disabilities (<i>n</i> = 373)	68(18.2%)	40(10.7%)	-----	73(19.6%)	192(51.5%)
TOTAL (<i>N</i> = 413)	77(18.6%)	45(10.9%)	-----	83(20.1%)	208(50.4%)

Table 2*DSS and Sample Population Percentages by Disability Type*

	LD	ADD*	LD/ADD*	MED**	PSYCH
All students registered with DSS	30%	30%	15%	15%	10%
DSS students in study	25%	32.5%	5%	20%	17.5%

*Denotes both ADD and ADHD types

**Includes hearing, visual, and other physical disabilities

Students with disabilities sought help most frequently for papers and “other” ($N = 10$, and $N = 16$, respectively). Students without disabilities also sought more help for papers and “other” ($n = 73$, and $N = 192$, respectively). None of the between group differences in terms of disability status and reason for seeking help were significant using a global F -test, $F(1, 411) = 1.098$, $p > .05$. Also, there were no significant differences related to gender, $F(1, 411) = .073$, $p > .05$, or year of student, $F(3, 409) = 2.172$, $p > .05$.

However, significant differences were found between year of student and total overall number of visits, using a chi-square test that assumed equal distribution, $p < .05$. Thus, the number of freshmen visits was by far the highest total ($N = 129$), which is not surprising given the assumption that freshmen need more support because they just entered college. It is mildly surprising that the sophomore year would be the lowest ($N = 77$), since help rates at R-MC have historically tailed off year by year until graduation.

Overall, students sought help most often for “other” reasons ($N = 208$, see Table 1). Using the notes on professor log sheets and informal interviews after the data collection, “other” reasons included homework or problem set questions, discussing group projects, miscellaneous questions about class material, extracurricular advising (clubs, work timesheets, or lab records), take-home exams, help with research projects, and problems related to advising.

Breaking down help by disability type (see Table 2) revealed no categories that were statistically different (in part due to small cell size). In a larger study, however, a researcher might reasonably expect to find significant differences in behavior between individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, due to disability stigma (Green, 2003).

There was variation by subject area in terms of total number of visits, which in part was due to whether multiple professors participated from the specific departments. Education, for example, had three participants, and recorded by far the largest number of total visits ($N = 108$). Drama, on the other hand, was represented by only one professor and had only one student visit ($N = 1$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to see if students with disabilities sought more help proportionally in specific subject areas than their peers without disabilities; no between-group differences tested significantly, $F(10, 402) = .889$, $p > .05$.

Finally, a logistic regression technique was employed to test the predictability of seeking help based on various factors, including gender and disability status. Several models were tested with disability status

as the dichotomous independent variable, and predictor variables of year, gender, and number of visits. No significant models or parameters were identified in the process.

Discussion

The results of this study support some of the findings in the previous research, and also reflect some of the lingering ambiguity about help-seeking as a behavioral construct. Seeking help is not solely about (a) meeting with professors outside of class. It includes utilizing many other resources; resources that students may or may not opt to utilize; and (b) resources that may come after or in lieu of meeting with professors outside of class. Based on a reasonable sample of students and professors in a given semester at R-MC, students with disabilities did not appear any less likely than their peers to seek help from their professors outside of the classroom. Thus, the presence of a significant disability stigma effect was not reinforced by the results.

However, a number of important possible confounding factors must be considered. Many students, both with and without disabilities, did not choose to seek help as defined in the study during the semester. The 185 students in the study represented approximately 16.1% of the total student body at the time, so more than 83% of the student body did not seek help from the participating professors, or sought help from non participating professors or other resources. Of the students who did not seek help, a reasonable argument can be made that the students with learning-related disabilities might have suffered more adverse academic consequences for their choice not to seek help than their peers without disabilities (Frank, 2004; Hoehn, 1999). To investigate the specific nature of stigma barriers to seeking help, it would be necessary to target a different sample of students, those with disabilities who did not seek help, to cite one example.

The results in this study are a function of the specific environment in which the study was conducted. Many small, private liberal arts schools focus a great deal of attention on the individual interactions between professors and students, and place a premium on encouraging students to seek help. The results of a study similar to this one might be very different if conducted at a larger university, or a community college. Also, it is possible that the same study could be repeated in the same environment during a different time of the semester and produce different results. Perhaps the nature of disability stigma and other barriers to seeking

help are manifested in different ways even among smaller institutions with similar missions.

Another issue to note is that of student motive. Although the study was not technically a self-report study, student motives for seeking help were partially determined by the faculty participants who chose a reason for each student visit (and presumably were accurate in their assessments). This non experimental design (like many others in the literature previously cited) did not obtain any true data about student motivations for seeking help. This highlights the difficulty of designing true experiments in the social sciences, and particularly in educational research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Finally, some educators have suggested that help-seeking rates can be *higher* among the population of students with learning-related disabilities in comparison to students without disabilities, rather than lower (Palmer & Roessler, 2000; Torkelson & Gussel, 1996). An increasing number of students with learning-related disabilities are gaining access to higher education in record numbers. Many of these students presently have individualized education programs (IEPs) in high school, the support of multiple case managers and teachers, and elaborate transition plans, so it may be reasonable to expect that they will be better at seeking help when they enter college. This possibility again emphasizes the need for clarifying the help seeking construct, and conducting further research. Further research may also help clarify the impact of gender on help seeking, and identify possible differences between disciplines and subject areas as they relate to help-seeking patterns.

Conclusion

College students with disabilities need to be equipped at least as well as their peers without disabilities with the ability to seek help (Gartin & Rumrill, 1996). The results of this study and anecdotal evidence suggest that many students with disabilities at R-MC do seek help when they need it (Trammell, 2004). In this study no statistical differences were found between students with and without disabilities in the rates they met with their professors outside of class. Future research may show whether this holds true across types of postsecondary environments and consistently at similar institutions.

This study did not answer the larger question of whether or not students with disabilities are seeking *enough* help. At the very least, the results suggest that further investigation of help seeking behavior in

college students with disabilities needs to be undertaken. Mixed-methods studies gathering both statistical and qualitative evidence might provide particularly meaningful insights in this regard. There is also a clear need for more experimental studies using random assignment and controls.

For disability service providers, the results of the present study hint that there may need to be some adjustments to the focus of their services. In addition to facilitating classroom accommodations such as allowing additional time on tests or proctoring tests in a separate room, it may also mean coaching college students on how to ask for help and addressing the issue of disability-related stigma in the campus wide environment. The vast literature on transition presumes that students with disabilities need more structure and encouragement when they enter college. Perhaps seeking help at the same rate as their peers without disabilities is still not seeking *enough* help (Clarke, 1992; Duffy, 2002; Edmonson, Fisher, & Christensen, 2003; Gartin & Rumrill, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Trammell, 2005).

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About the Authors

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Melissa Hathaway was an undergraduate student researcher working with Dr. Trammell and Dr. Jennifer Bruce in the Higgins Academic Center at Randolph-Macon College, and graduated cum laude from Randolph-Macon College in 2006 with a major in History and minors in International Studies and Asian Studies.

Appendix A

Email sent to faculty recruiting them as participants

Dear Faculty members:

How many students visit you during office hours each week? Have you ever been curious at the end of the semester to know just how many students you met face to face with outside of class? Do you ever wonder if those meetings make a difference?

The R-MC IRB just approved a study entitled “**Help Seeking Patterns in College Students with Disabilities,**” and I am seeking faculty members who might be willing to record office visits by all students on a simple form until Christmas break.

While I can’t offer a stipend, I can offer two fringe benefits for those who are willing. 1) I plan to write a letter of thanks noting “above and beyond” support of student learning from the Higgins Academic Center that can go into a vita or personnel file, and 2) I intend to share the results of the study specifically with those who participate if they want to compare their results to the overall results. (In other words, if you are interested, you can look at the stats for your students and compare them to the whole study—this specific data otherwise will go unreported. Only aggregate data will be used with outside audiences. It might give you some important feedback about the specific students you deal with, such as what percentage of your meetings was with students with disabilities, etc.).

Note that the recording sheets with students’ names will not indicate whether students have registered with DSS or not. That will be coded in the DSS office during the winter break. After data entry, the recording sheets with names will be destroyed.

For anyone who agrees to participate, I will put the recording sheets and consent forms for students in your mailbox in Peele Hall. Perhaps, too, I can throw in a Higgins Academic Center coffee mug (and some coffee if you’re passing near the HAC).

Thank you for considering this—I believe there are some important trends relating to students with disabilities that the DSS office can help with if I have more information. I also believe that faculty would be interested in knowing whether students with disabilities seek help at the same rate as other students. I’ve heard anecdotally either extreme (seeking no help at all, or monopolizing the professor’s time), and there are also conflicting results in the published literature on help seeking.

With regards,

Jack Trammell
Higgins Academic Center

Appendix B

Log Sheet for Faculty

Student Visit Log

(1=test, 2=advising, 3=major, 4=paper, 5=other)

<i>Student Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reason for Visit</i> (circle)
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5
	___/___/___	1 2 3 4 5